

## **Polo Historical Society**

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Although there are countless historical societies in the United States, I chose the Polo Historical Society because of its excellent contribution to our local history. The Polo Historical Society has several different sites and artifacts in its collection. It also has regular meetings and is still improving its collection today. The Polo Historical Society president, Betty Obendorf, was pleased to give me an interview and tell me everything she could about the society's dedication to history in the Polo area.

The Polo Historical Society was founded in the early 1900s by Zenas Aplington, and was going strong until about 1914 when their leader J. W. Clinton became ill. Clinton worked for a newspaper and was involved in many historical societies in Illinois and Wisconsin over a span of thirty-five years. After his death the society faded away until 1957, but did not become strong again until the 1960s. During this time, the society put up informational signs at all of its historical sites around Polo and Buffalo Grove. Buffalo Grove was renamed Polo after the Illinois railroad was built. Milledgeville Blacktop, the Lime Kiln, the First Cabin in Ogle County, the School House, the law office, and post office are only some of the historical sites where they put up signs. From 1970 to 1978 work began to save the home of their founder, Zenas Aplington. Finally in 1981 they were incorporated as a non-profit organization.

The Galena Trail was the beginning of Polo and the surrounding area. This trail was one hundred and seventy-five miles between Peoria and Galena, and an optional one-hundred mile trail along the Mississippi River that led to the lead mines in Wisconsin and Iowa. The trail was originally used for the fur trade. It was called the Kellogg Trail before the Black Hawk War. After that it was surveyed by Levi Warner and became a major trail. It was also used as a state coach road in 1833. Today it has become a secondary transportation route in the area. The old Galena Trail is a public accessible driving, biking and hiking path. Although it has been modernized some, it is still the same trail as it was when the fur trade began.

There are a couple of things that are unique to the Polo Historical Society. It has one of the biggest Native American collections in Illinois. Martin Schryver collected pieces from all over the United States and gave it to the Polo library in 1942. The library kept it until 1997 when they needed to get rid of it because of limited space. They sold it to the historical society in 1998. This was one of the biggest and most valuable collections that the Polo Historical Society acquired. A specialist came to see the collection after hearing about it and said that he was amazed with how much it had not just in the Native American collection, but in everything. Another astounding attribute of the Polo society was its founder. Zenas Aplington arrived in Buffalo Grove in 1837 at the age of twenty-two. After the Illinois Railroad was built, he moved his family to the new town of Polo. He was also a leader of the Republican Party and a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln stayed in the Aplington house for two nights while he was in Oregon speaking for the Presidential campaign between John C. Fremont and James Buchanan. Judge Campbell recollected his time with Lincoln saying that “Mr. Lincoln

was very talkative and told many stories so quaint and funny that we almost exploded with laughter.” Then he went on to tell that although he had a sense of humor, usually “His facial expressions...were always sad and thoughtful.” The historical society also has a collection of artifacts from the first surveyor of Ogle County. The surveyor’s name was Levi Warner. His tools, maps and personal notes are a part of the historical society’s collection. All of his effects were given to the society in 1906 by his son.

The museum also has a timeline clothing collection. It includes the first settlers, World War I, the Twenties conservative look, the Flappers era, and wedding dresses from 1900 through 1950. The museum also has artifacts from these times and also includes agricultural equipment and other pieces of history. Many of the farm equipment artifacts were John Deere but some were made and designed by local farmers. “We are very proud of our collection...it is one of the best in the state of Illinois.”

Although there are countless historical societies in the United States, I chose the Polo Historical Society because of its excellent contribution to our local history. The Polo Historical Society has many historical places, artifacts, and information that are preserved and given to the public. It has restored historical buildings like the Aplington house, the Lime Kiln, the Doctor’s house, the school house and several others. It has Indian artifacts, clothes from almost every era from the settlers on, and a selection of other artifacts. It also has history that was handed down through the generations including Levi Warner’s journal, historical documents and personal accounts of life in Polo and Buffalo Grove.

Polo has done everything in its power to keep Polo a historical spot for generations of them to come. “It’s not just about Polo, it’s about Ogle County and giving

history to everyone” says Betty Obendorf. The Polo Historical Society’s goal is to preserve and provide history to all. It has achieved its goal and continues to make Polo an important historical center of Ogle County. [From Patricia L. Goitein, *The Galena Trail & Coach Road Interpretive Trail*; John Heckman, Catherine Phalen, and Lester Weaver, *Voice of the Prairie*; Betty Obendorf, *Levi Warner & Martha Bailey Winters Warner*; Mary Obendorf, Student Historian’s interview, Oct. 4, 2008; and *Polo Historical Society*, (Brochure).]